

## CHILD OBSERVATION TOOL

### Measuring the Mental Health Climate

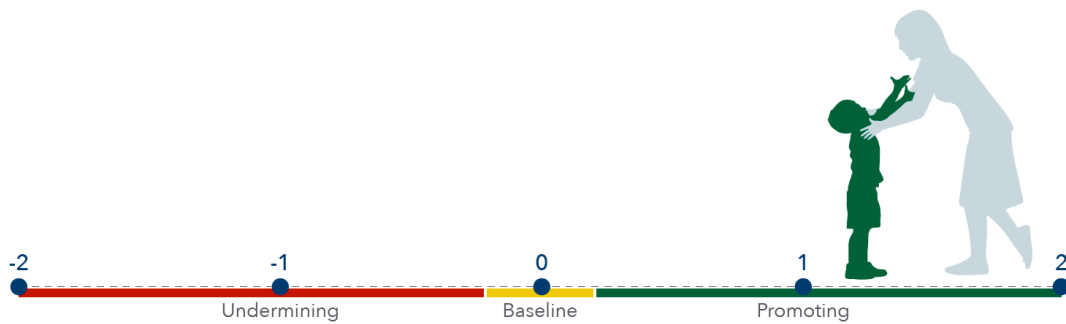
The **Climate of Healthy Interactions for Learning and Development (CHILD)** Tool (Gilliam & Reyes, 2017) is a comprehensive observational assessment of the mental health (or social and emotional) climate of early care and education settings. A mentally healthy climate is characterized by authentic warmth and friendship, a developmentally appropriate and child-centered pedagogy, the equitable treatment of children, and a focus on fostering children's psychosocial well-being and holistic development.

The CHILD partitions the mental health climate into nine dimensions or categories:

1. *Transitions* – smooth, efficient, flexible, and productive transitions between activities.
2. *Directions & Rules* – behavior management characterized by setting, modeling, and enforcing clear, consistent, and developmentally appropriate rules of conduct and applying proactive and positive behavior strategies.
3. *Social & Emotional Learning* – fostering emotional literacy, relationship skill-building, and social problem-solving.
4. *Adult Awareness* – monitoring and attunement to both overt and subtle signals and signs for assistance.
5. *Adult Affect* – emotional state of adults.
6. *Adult Cooperation* – adults' demonstration of teamwork, camaraderie, and genuine enjoyment of each other's presence.
7. *Adult-Child Interactions* – adult interactions with children characterized by dignity, respect, genuine relationships, equity, and the celebration of diversity.
8. *Individualized & Developmentally Appropriate Practices* – promotion of holistic development through a child-centered and individualized approach.
9. *Child Behaviors* – child behaviors exhibiting positive affect and self-regulation.

These nine dimensions are further divided into 28 easily observable items. These items focus on behaviors and interactions that occur in early childhood classrooms every day.

The CHILD guides observers in placing each item along a quality spectrum based on their observation. At one end of this spectrum are interactions and behaviors that **Undermine** a mentally healthy climate. For example, a teacher shaming a child for forgetting the name of a letter or number. At the opposite end of the spectrum are interactions and behaviors that **Promote** a mentally healthy climate. For instance, a teacher telling a child that s/he/they sees and appreciates the child's hard work on a given task. In the middle of the spectrum is the **Baseline Expectation**. These are behaviors and interactions that do no harm (they are certainly not undermining), but which are not quite best practice (and as such do not meet the criteria for promoting).



## Conducting a CHILD Assessment

The entire assessment takes about two hours, ideally divided into four coding blocks. Each coding block is about 30 minutes long. First, observers spend 20 minutes watching the classroom and taking copious notes on adults' and children's behaviors and interactions. Then, observers spend approximately 10 minutes anchoring and scoring each CHILD item based on their observation. This process is then repeated three more times, for a total of four coding blocks. The assessment must include both structured and unstructured activities, and may include activities such as snack, lunch, arrival/dismissal, and outdoor play.

## Age Group and Setting

The Pre-School (or PK) CHILD is intended for the 3-5 year-old age group in center-based care and education centers. However, it has been used with younger and older age groups and also in non-center-based programs. Currently under development is a version of the CHILD specifically for Infants and Toddlers in family-based programs (I/T CHILD).

## Utility

The CHILD Tool, and its predecessor the Preschool Mental Health Climate Scale (Gilliam, 2008), has been used most often to evaluate the quality of early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) services. The CHILD has also been used for professional development, primarily through CHILD-informed ECMHC. Early adopters of the CHILD include early childhood mental health consultants, researchers, program evaluators, school administrators and program directors, instructional coaches, and teachers. To date, it has been used across the US and in Canada.

## Observer Training and Certification

There are no prerequisites for training in the CHILD Tool. However, training and certification on the CHILD is essential prior to its use. This ensures the Tool's integrity and increases its

reliability and validity. Certification is granted to observers who complete the CHILD training and then score at least 80% on our online reliability assessment.

Currently two training formats are available:

1. *In-person* – A member of the CHILD Team will travel to your location and provide a 1.5-day interactive training.
2. *Webinar* – A member of the CHILD Team leads a 3-hour live webinar. Following the webinar, participants are given access to a suite of training videos online. The practice videos are self-paced, but must be completed within two weeks of the initial webinar.

Please contact us at [childscale@yale.edu](mailto:childscale@yale.edu) for additional information, scheduling, and pricing for both options.

Recertification or refresher training is available upon request. Additionally, we provide ongoing support to prevent coding drift, which is the natural tendency for observers to score the tool less reliably over time.

### **Distinction from Other Classroom Observation Instruments**

There are many observational measures of the quality of early childhood care and education settings. Among the most prominently used are the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015). The CHILD is not intended to replace these other measures, but to supplement them. The CHILD takes a deep dive into the quality of the social and emotional dimensions of early learning settings.

The CHILD's unique attributes include its

1. Explicit assessment of all interactions including adult-child, child-child, and adult-adult;
2. Explicit assessment of the extent to which adults are attuned to both children's overt and subtle signals for assistance;
3. Explicit assessment of verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal behaviors (e.g., adult affect and tone of voice; see Corrington, Hebl, & Tsang, 2018); and
4. Inclusion of items that examine how adults facilitate social problem-solving and equity.

### **Emerging Data**

Training on the CHILD was in direct response to requests from various state agencies and school districts. Agreements with these entities entitled the CHILD Tool developers access to de-identified data collected independently. Data obtained from five states ( $N=678$  classrooms) showed that CHILD scores fell mostly within the 0 or "baseline expectation" level and demonstrated very good internal consistency, Cronbach's  $\alpha=.87-.95$  for individual dimensions ( $\alpha=.98$  for Total score).

Moreover, the CHILD was associated with structural elements of the classroom. Higher child-teacher ratios were associated with lower CHILD scores [for Total Score:  $r(406) = -.11, p = .021$ ]. CHILD scores also differed in type of activity observed,  $F(2,130) = 4.42, p = 0.014$ . Post-hoc comparisons showed that CHILD scores were higher in structured activities (e.g., circle time) than in unstructured activities (e.g., outdoor playtime) or a combination of structured/unstructured activities. In addition, CHILD scores were associated moderately with CLASS scores (Pianta et al., 2008),  $r_s(180) = .20-.29$  for Total CHILD scores and CLASS domains.

Additional pilot data from a small sample of kindergarten classrooms indicated an association between the Social & Emotional dimension and English language learners' language proficiency test scores, with effect sizes as high as 2.27. The social and emotional climate-language link has been corroborated by an independent study from Duke University researchers. In addition to the CHILD's associations with language development, an independent study conducted by Duke University researchers also revealed that scores on the CHILD Tool were associated not only with preschool social-emotional competence but also with performance measures of executive functioning (Rosanbalm et al., manuscript in preparation). Early executive functioning abilities predict later school achievement, especially mathematical skills (Bull, Espy, & Wiebe, 2008; Clark, Pritchard, & Woodward, 2010).

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